



Inventing American History (Boston Review Books)

William Hogeland

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American public history--in magazines and books, television documentaries, and museums--tends to celebrate its subject at all costs, even to the point of denial and distortion. This does us a great disservice, argues William Hogeland in *Inventing American History*. Looking at details glossed over in three examples of public history--the Alexander Hamilton revival, tributes to Pete Seeger and William F. Buckley, and the Constitution Center in Philadelphia--Hogeland considers what we lose when history is written to conform to political aims. Questioning the resurrection, by both neocons and the left, of Alexander Hamilton as the founder of the American financial system--if not of the American dream itself--Hogeland delves deeply into Hamilton's brutal treatment of working-class entrepreneurs. And debunking recent hagiographies of Pete Seeger and William F. Buckley, Hogeland deftly parses Seeger's embrace of communism and Buckley's unreconstructed views on race. Hogeland then turns his attention to the U.S. Constitution Center in Philadelphia (the location of Barack Obama's speech on race), comparing its one-note celebration of the document to the National Park Service tours of nearby Independence Hall. The Park Service tours don't advance any particular point of view, but by being almost purely informative with a kind of hands-on detail, they make the past come to life, available for both celebration and criticism. We should be able to respect the Constitution without being forced to our knees before it, Hogeland argues; we can handle the truth about the Framers' intense politicking and compromises.. Only when we can ground our public history in the gritty events of the day, embracing its contradictions and difficulties, will we be able to learn from it.

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